

BOOK REVIEW

Stage Music of Maharashtra: Ashok D. Ranade: Sangeet Natak Akademi: New Delhi; 1986; 114 pages; Rs. 60.00

IT IS INDEED a rare experience to come across a treatise on Indian Music which deals with the subject in such a highly analytical and sophisticated manner. Dr. Ranade's monograph on "Stage Music of Maharashtra" belongs to this category. And quite naturally, and perhaps inevitably, this monograph is in line with his earlier publication "Music and Musicians of Hindustan" published in 1984. A few years earlier Dr. Ranade had published an equally erudite and informative book in Marathi on Folk Music. There is a general tendency observed among purists in the field of Indian Music to consider folk-music and stage-music as inferior to art-music or classical music. Fortunately, Dr. Ranade does not believe in this kind of caste system in Indian Music. There is not the slightest doubt now that the origin of art-music or classical music is found in the folk-music of the country. There is no reason why one should feel shy or ashamed of one's parentage.

Dr. Ranade thought it both necessary and important to devote his present monograph to the study of stage music of Maharashtra because he knows that, for all practical purposes, the music of Maharashtra, of

Goa and, perhaps, north Karnataka, is the stage music which itself is the amalgam of different strands of music. And in recent times it was the Marathi stage-music which introduced classical music to large masses of people in the urban areas. We have had a few publications in Marathi on the stage music of Maharashtra. But these were largely descriptive and informative. Dr. Ranade's monograph on the same subject radically differs from these earlier publications in two respects. Firstly, it is written in English and is, therefore, addressed to a much wider audience. I am sure this monograph will be read with interest both in India and abroad. Secondly, Dr. Ranade is not content with merely informing his readers, He instructs them. He not only brings new facts to their notice but also throws new and fresh light on facts and events already known. His treatment of the subject is highly analytical and demands on the part of his readers considerable concentration of attention although they may feel they are treading on familiar grounds.

Dr. Ranade has delved deep into the history of Marathi stage and stage music. His references to Khalap and Manerikar documents of the late 18th century

and early 19th century respectively, Prof. Bhanu's article of 1887 on the construction of theatres for drama, are some of the examples which show that he has done his home work thoroughly and diligently. Many of us, including Dr. Ranade, have not personally seen the Golden Age of Marathi stage music. Those who have personally heard Halyalkar or Keshavarao Bhonsale are few and far between. Some of us have heard the gramophone records of Bhonsale which, unfortunately, do not reflect the performing ability of the singer. Most of us have heard the legendary Balgandharva when he was already on the decline. Inspite of these obvious handicaps, Dr. Ranade is able to trace the evolution of singing of these artists, particularly of Keshavarao Bhonsale, Balgandharva and Dinanath who dominated the Marathi stage. Dr. Ranade is an eminent musicologist and also a performing artist of no mean order. He has had a firm grounding in hindustani classical music which has served as the major source of Marathi stage music. Secondly, he has very carefully heard and analysed the recorded music of Bhonsale, Balgandharva, Dinanath and others published at different periods of time. He has also carefully studied the tunes selected by S.K. Kolhatkar, Tembe, Bakhale, Vazebua, Mas-

ter Krishnarao for stage songs and has correlated them with the stage songs sung by the artists. He is, therefore, able to show how the music of an artist evolved over a period of time and as ordained by the tune selectors. Dr. Ranade's observations and comments on the various facets of stage music bear the stamp of authenticity.

Quite appropriately adhering to the convention of Marathi music drama, Dr. Ranade commences the discussion with *Nandi* in which he takes us back into the middle of the last century and shows us how the stage and stage-craft of the Marathi drama evolved. The chief landmarks in this evolution were the elevation of the acting area and the segregation of the audience from the acting area. Elevation of the acting area made possible use of front-curtains, drop-curtains, employment of wings, use of special light-effects, etc. With the segregation of audience from the acting-area, audience had to give up their participant status and be content with only spectator or onlooker status. One more important landmark was staging of dramatic performances in enclosed places, in halls, or in specially built theatres. It should be remembered that these vital changes in stage-craft were spread over a period of time and were influenced by what the British performers were

doing in places like Bombay. These changes in stage-craft substantially influenced the quality of performance-both acting and singing.

Just as in the case of Indian classical music the tradition was to transmit knowledge orally, the tradition during the Bhavephase was to transmit dramatic themes and dialogues orally. The dramatic themes were called *Akhyāns* which, though written out, were in the sole possession of the director and actors did not have access to them. All the singing was done by the *Sutradhar* who sometimes happened to be the proprietor of the dramatic troupe. Since the actors depended for the dialogues on the oral instruction by the director, they could as well take liberty with the dialogues and indulge in their own improvisation which were styled as *Kacheri*. The first "ticketed" performance is reported to have taken place at Bombay in 1853.

With the rise of newly educated middle class in cities like Pune and Bombay, the audience demanded realistic and articulated dramatic themes and dialogues couched in literary language. And this is how the "bookish" drama came into existence. Dr. Ranade points out that Kirtane's first bookish play of 1861 was also the first Marathi prose-drama. There was a qualitative change in the

composition of the audience. It was no longer confined to royal families or aristocratic nobility who were quite content with mythological themes. The new audience comprised the educated middle class which was already exposed, in schools and colleges, to English literature and English plays. They now attached greater importance to elements like plot construction, adequate and realistic scenic effects and showed definite preference for more human themes. The days of *Akhyāns* were already over. The rise of stage-activity during this period was much influenced by the educated middle class and also by the British in India. The evolution of the Marathi stage and the articulation and refinement of dramatic themes owe a good deal to these two influences. Vishnudas Bhave is generally considered to be the father of Marathi stage music and Dr. Ranade also subscribes to this view. But, cannot this epithet be more appropriately attributed to Annasahab Kirloskar? There is no trace of music employed by Bhave in his 52 *Akhyāns*. Presumably it was largely based on Kirtan Music. But Kirloskar Sangit is alive even today!

Dr. Ranade tells us that Marathi music drama had its earliest, known manifestation in the Marathi state of Tanjore, and that the Tanjore tradition

dominated the South for 150 years (1690-1855). It is, however, problematic whether the Tanjore tradition had any direct bearing on the evolution of Marathi stage music. The Tanjore plays were largely based on *Yakshagān* and Gomantak and Konkan plays relied on *Dashavatār*. It is necessary to remember that both *Yalshagān* and *Dashavatār* have been a common heritage of India although they might have assumed different forms in different regions. It is, therefore, less than correct to say that Marathi drama was imported into Maharashtra from a particular region. Dr. Ranade is not sure whether Tanjore plays were at all seen in Maharashtra. But there is a greater possibility of Gomantak and Konkan plays influencing music-drama of Maharashtra. Dr. Ranade has given a detailed account of the Bhavé-phase of Marathi music-drama mainly because that phase witnessed important landmarks in the evolution of Marathi stage and stage craft.

It would be a futile exercise to trace the genesis and development of Marathi music-drama in any chronological order. As Dr. Ranade rightly points out, "this art form was in gestation in a number of places, in a number of minds and also at overlapping time areas". At the same time it will not be contested that the music-drama took a defini-

tive and aesthetically refined shape during what is called the Kirloskar-phase. During this phase there were four principal dramatic companies which presented musical plays and each company was broadly specializing in a particular kind of music; Patankar Sangit Mandali in Parsi-Gujarati-Urdū tunes and action-songs; Waikar Mandali in high quality art music; and Rajapurkar Mandali in devotional music of *Varkari* sect. In Kirloskar Mandali each singer had his own variety of music although they all shared *Kirtan* music in varying proportions. Each Mandali had its own audience although none could vie with Kirloskar Mandali in point of quality of its dramas, its music and social prestige the Mandali enjoyed. The principal actor-singers of the Kirloskar Mandali had their own special style of singing; and yet the overall musical impression was harmonious and melodious and was bequeathed to succeeding generations of actor-singers as Kirloskari Sangit.

Annasahab Kirloskar emerges as the most dominating figure of the period. As a successful playwright, imaginative tune-selector, as a competent manager and administrator, Kirloskar outdistanced his competitors in the profession by a wide margin. Another outstanding figure of the same period was Bhaurao Kolhatkar whose

musical gifts were incomparable; and though he expired in 1901, he and his music continued to be the standard of evaluation or the norm by which to assess the musical prowess of his successors, e.g. Joglekar and Balgandharva. One more notable feature of the Kirloskar-phase was the emergence of G.B. Deval and S.K. Kolhatkar as dramatists and as tune-selectors. Deval was cast in his mentor's mould and wrote two mythological plays which proved highly successful. Deval also had the privilege to compose songs and select tunes for Kirloskar's *Shakuntala* and *Saubhadra*. Deval wrote his social play *Sharada* in 1898. It proved to be a tremendous success. Its music differed from the music of his earlier plays only marginally.

Dr. Ranade has done S.K. Kolhatkar full justice by acclaiming him as a conscious revolutionary both as a playwright and tune-selector. He was determined to select entirely new themes for his plays. He was equally determined to break the mould of Kirloskari Sangit and select such tunes which would enable perfect rendering but would not permit elaboration which often harms the dramatic element. He selected his tunes from Parsi-Gujrati-Urdu plays which had become the craze of the Bombay audience. He was ably assisted in this

process by his friend Hirabai Pednekar, a professional singer. Dr. Ranade has paid this gifted artist a well deserved tribute both as the first female dramatist and probably the first female music director of Marathi stage-music.

Dr. Ranade would have done well if he had told us why Kolhatkar felt impelled to move away from the Kirloskar-Deval mould of music as well as of dramatic themes. He, of course, makes an oblique reference to "the forces clamouring for change (that) must have brought on a tremendous pressure to compel an establishment like the Kirloskar Mandali to accept a complete musical change-over" (page 55). What precisely were these forces clamouring for change? And what kind of change was desired? Was Kolhatkar reflecting the common urge of the urban educated audience to hear something new and attractive? The audience perhaps needed some relief from the art music, from *Saki* and *dindi* and clamoured for some "lilt and verve of music" which Kolhatkar readily supplied in his plays. The audience was perhaps tired of mythological and historical themes and desired different kinds of dramatic themes, may be romantic, may be realistic, etc. Kolhatkar and his plays held the dramatic field of Maharashtra for some years at

least because he appeared to meet, through his plays and music, genuine social needs of the time. His plays were relegated to the background though his music is not entirely dead. It is not widely known that Kolhatkar also composed songs for N.C. Kelkar's *Krishnarjun yuddh* and Gadkari's "Bhāvabandhana".

What really broke the back of Kolhatkar's stage-music was not so much the music of Deval's *Shāradā* as that of Khadilkar's *Mānāpamān*. It is, of course, true that *Shāradā* revived interest in melody, in art music. Besides Deval was also dealing with a very live contemporary social problem. Govindrao Tembe who selected tunes for *Mānāpamān* was not a novice in the field of music. He was very well acquainted with art music as well as different kinds of semi-classical varieties. He was, therefore, able to strike a proper balance between art music and semi-classical *Purabthāt* music of the north. Tembe's music immediately clicked and helped Joglekar for the first time to realize his potential as an actor-singer. It also considerably influenced the singing style of Bālagandharva who received *tālim* in the tunes from both Tembe and Bakhale. This kind of collaboration between Tembe and Bakhale in tune selection continued when the Kirloskar Mandali staged

Vidyāharana in 1913. Dr. Ranade makes an important observation here when he says that "Musically speaking, Bālgandharva was perhaps at his most balanced state at this juncture and surely displayed a full command of the musico-dramatic forces he was exploring and exploiting" (page 67). The Bakhale-touch to stage-music reached its zenith in *Swayamvar* in 1916 and Balgandharva turned classical. In this play and the next *Draupadi*—Bakhale concentrated on *Khayal* music as well as on Balgandharva. Not only had Bakhale concentrated on Balgandharva but the playwright Khadilkar also started concentrating on this actor-singer in *Swayamvar*, *Menaka* and *Sāvitri*. Master Krishnarao who selected tunes for the Gandharva Mandali continued the Bakhale tradition of concentrating on *Khayal* music and Balgandharva. Is it not possible that, as a consequence of this process of concentrating on a particular actor-singer, Balgandharva lost "his most balanced state" as well as "command of the musico-dramatic forces" and allowed himself "to be bogged down in his own music"?

It is thus obvious that tune-selectors considerably influence the singing style of actor-singers. This change in the style of singing was again observed when Bai Sundarabai selected

tunes for Balgandharva in the play *Ekach Pyala*. Being based on *quwwali tunes*, the songs did not permit much elaboration, Dinanath had received some training in dancing and this did influence his style of singing in the Hindi Plays-*Taj-i-wafa* and *Kantoumeri Phool*. There have been a few actor-singers of exceptional ability and innovative faculty who developed their own style of singing while broadly conforming to the tunes selected by composers.

This leads us to the concept of music making. In the opinion of Dr. Rande the term music-makers connotes artists belonging to two categories, music-composers and actor-singers. Music-composers are also referred to as tune-selectors. It is necessary to know the process by which tunes are chosen. The actor-singer tells the musician his requirements in regard to songs, the situations in the drama where music is desired, perhaps the time sequence in which tunes are to be selected. The musician will bear in mind the different dramatic situations for which tunes are needed. He will probably offer, not one but a number of tunes for the choice of the actor-singer. It may be that the tune recommended by the musician is immediately accepted by the singer. It may also be that the musician suggests alternative tunes from which the singer

selects those which he likes most. It will thus be seen that, in the ultimate analysis, it is the actor-singer who selects the tunes, not the musician. In the selection of tunes, in fact, in the whole process, the playwright also participates, and sometimes participates decisively. Music of the Kirloskar-age was the dramatization of *Kirtan* and folk-music, especially stri-geet. The other major source of tunes was the art music. The Hindustani music has been something like the Reserve Bank of Music from which tunes have been borrowed. And Hindustani music does not mean only *Khayal* music. It also comprises semi-classical varieties like *Thumri*, *Dadra*, *Quwwali*, *Kajri*, etc. We have also freely drawn from the fund of Carnatak music. Some of the musicians have, of course, done an excellent job in helping actor-singers in the selection of tunes. But, can we consider all those musicians music-makers? Those composers who compose new tunes, fresh tunes, may be considered music-makers provided their new and fresh tunes conform to aesthetic standards. Govindrao Tembe, Master Krishnarao were, among others, music makers par excellence. Similarly, those actor-singers who render music on the stage in a mechanical or routine manner are not music makers. We have had outstanding singers on the Marathi stage who created

their own musical moulds-Bhonsale, Balgandharva, Dinanath. Dr. Ranade has very eloquently brought out the musical contribution of Balgandharva in the following words:

"..... Balgandharva did not stop at learning these forms from Tembe. He in fact very soon stamped Tembe's tunes with his own brand of melody-oriented vocalism. In the final analysis, Balgandharva transformed the tunes into masked and sustained expressions of restrained pathos and eroticism" (Page 69) Again Dr. Ranade points out; "Balgandharva's powers of bringing about a metamorphosis were again in evidence in his rendering of *Swayamvar* music. Pandit Bakhale had chosen select specimens of dignified *Khayal* music for the play. He taught Balgandharva these tunes along with original raga-compositions on which they were based. Thus equipped, Balgandharva again demonstrated his faculty of assimilating a new musical idiom quickly and yet deviate from it" (page 69). And in the process he was also enhancing the aesthetic charm of the original composition. This is truly music making *par excellence*. Pandit Vaze bua must have had similar experiences when he taught tunes to Bhonsale and Dinanath. Music makers are the rarest of birds!

Dr. Ranade has made an attempt to analyse the causes of

the decline of Marathi stage music. When exactly the decline commenced does not appear to be certain. At one place Dr. Ranade says that "after 1920s, music-drama gradually diminished in stature as a source of musical entertainment" (page 83). Again he refers to the period 1930-1940 as the Dark Age of music-drama. In another place Dr. Ranade says that "Marathi drama, taken as a whole, shed its skin after the thirties. It picked up again only in the late fifties". What exactly does he mean by "shedding the skin"? Does it not mean 'rejuvenation'? If so, the earlier sentence makes no sense. He makes a reference to the fast changing composition of audience in the middle of 1920. He does not tell us in what direction the composition was changing. Was it changing away from music-drama and in favour of prose-drama? Dr. Ranade says that Gandharva Natak Mandali proved to be the main sustenance of the entire Marathi stage music. If so, will it not be more logical to infer that the fortunes of the Marathi stage music were vitally linked with the fortunes of this Mandali which most definitely declined after 1930? Is it not also possible that the audience was rather over-fed with art music? The composers did not seem to be perturbed by the fact that "generous employment of invit-

ing and flexible singing moulds was almost to guarantee a complete seduction of drama 'by music'. Narrating Balgandharva's "firsts", Dr. Ranade says, "He was also the first proprietor-actor who employed art-musicians of high calibre and all-India stature as accompanists..... Balgandharva was also responsible for displacing the pedal-harmonium with 'organ' around 1920. All these changes clearly indicate ascendancy of music and singer 'in stage-craft and performance-practice" (page 35-36). The practice of accepting "encores" might have started with Keshavrao Bhonsale and this practice was responsible for "laying the foundation of a convention that allowed music to have an upper hand" and for creating dramatic imbalance by giving an undue importance and scope to music as music (page 37). We have had too much of it and it was too good to last!

Dr. Ranade says that during the period 1930-1940 (which he describes as the Dark Age) "the educated class was undergoing a change in dramatic taste. It had developed a keener craving for prose-plays. It was absurd to force music-drama on an audience which was not in a mood to accept it." (page 83). But the Mandalis which specialized in prose-dramas were also in equally dire financial conditions. The two main factors

which really crippled the Marathi stage, music or no music, were the onset of the great Depression and the advent of the Talkies. The two almost coincided in point of time. Those who in their youth have experienced the terrible consequences of the Depression—unemployment and loss of purchasing power will bear ample testimony to those facts. Those who had a little money to spare found the talkie a great novelty and a little cheaper. The drama theatres were practically deserted and it was next to impossible for any proprietor of a Mandali to support a group of 30 to 40 participants while the gate money was dwindling every day. It was, therefore, in sheer desperation that Balgandharva, Bapurao Pendharkar and Dina-nath dismantled their Mandalis and sought refuge in the film industry for which they had neither the temperament nor the experience.

Dr. Ranade has tried to relate decline of Marathi music-drama to the introduction of gramophone! Well, music-drama and the gramaphone is repetitive and bears no comparison with the live song sung on the stage. Music-drama and music-circles are also not good substitutes. The audience is different and so also the music. The music sung in a concert at a music-circle is different in kind

and style from the music sung on the stage. Dr. Ranade has also sought to explain the decline of Marathi stage-drama in terms of a decline in the male population of the city of Bombay during the decade 1921-1931 (page 85). He has also tried to give his analysis a certain quantitative precision by quoting figures of the decline of male population. One must presume that the males who disappeared through the gate of Death were all lovers of music drama! With so much patronage removed, the decline must occur. If the Marathi music-drama had declined throughout Maharashtra, the male population must have declined in all the cities of Maharashtra during 1921-1931!

Attempts were certainly made after 1930 to give a boost to dramatic activity in Maharashtra by introducing certain innovations, e.g. providing background music, converting lyrical poems into songs, humming before bursting into *alaps*, shifting musical instruments back to the wings, reducing musical elaboration, etc. The examples of plays cited in this connection are *Baby* by Bende in 1932 and *Andhalachishala* by Vártak in 1933. These two plays did create a little flutter in the dramatic circles but their appeal was confined to a small elite class. And ironically enough, the popularity of *Andhalachishala* largely

depended on the two songs sung by Jyotsna Bhole!

It was mainly Atre who kept the flag of Marathi drama flying during this most difficult period. Though he did not eschew music, he kept it under control. The strength of his plays did not depend on music but on plot construction, satire, wit and humour. Earlier Madhavarao Joshi had entered the dramatic field almost with a bang. Although he had controlled music in his plays, his songs were not free from the "infection" of "encores". In one of his plays a satirical song was sung in *raga Bhairavi* and it invariably received "encores"!

Dr. Ranade refers at one place to the efforts made by some Mandalis to conform to the norm of realism in their musical plays (page 83). But in his view to combine music and drama and yet to conform to the canon of realism is to show irrelevant aesthetic assessment. What exactly is the place and nature of realism in theatric experience? If Dr. Ranade's view is to prevail, how could we account for the success of Atre's plays and Ranganekar's, among others, *Kulavadhu* which dealt with contemporary social themes and which owed a part of their success to music? It all depends on a combination of circumstances. Natya Niketan, Ranganekar, Jyotsna Bhole and Master Krishnarao was one such

happy combination. Master Krishnarao was the most discriminating, innovative and imaginative music maker of our times. And yet his music could not save *Asha Nirasha*, *Nand Kumar*, *Menaka*, *Savitri* from oblivion, although the legendary Balgandharva had played roles of heroine in these plays. On the other hand, Deval's *Samshay Kallol* which was lying on the wayside for a number of years, suddenly came to life (1916) with the infusion of music.

Dr. Ranade has done well to pay a well-deserved tribute to Londhe, an actor and singer of uncommon gifts, who had made herculean efforts to revive interest in Marathi music-drama and who could truly be called the last of the Romans! But it is difficult to understand why Ganapatrao Dewaskar finds a place and why Krishnarao Gore is not even mentioned. Ganapatrao Dewaskar might have been a competent concert singer, but his tenure on the music stage was both brief and precarious. On the other hand, Krishnarao Gore was far above the average both as an actor and singer.

Dr. Ranade refers to "first" ticketed performances of Bhave's play but mentions three different dates, i.e. 19th March 1853, 9th March 1853 and 14th February 1853 (page 4, 22). Which date is definitive? Hirabai Pednekar's play "*Dāmini*"

was staged by Keshavrao Bhonsale in 1911 and not by Kirloskar Mandali despite very intimate relationship between Hirabai and Joglekar (Page 29 and 38). Dr Ranade says that Balgandharva was the first actor-singer to bring out the accompanists from the wings and install them in front of the stage. Here again, he mentions three separate years when the change was supposed to have been effected; i.e. 1908, 1909 and 1910 (page 35, 41 and 100). In fact, this change was effected much earlier and had nothing to do with the partial deafness of Balgandharva. Dr. Ranade mentions two separate years for the establishment of Balwant Sangit Mandali, viz 1916 and 1918 (page 34 and 76). Shankarrao Sarnaik is referred to as Yeshwantrao Sarnaik (page 15). Yeshwant was the name of the Sangit Natak Mandali and its life tenure was not 1914 to 1923 but 1919 to 1934 (page 39). Dr Ranade tells us that Balkoba Natekar was paid Rs. 200 per month (page 107) but the salary of a collector was only Rs. 20 per month (page 106). What kind of a collector was he?

These are indeed minor blemishes which should not detract from the value and importance of the monograph which will always have a place of honour among publications on Indian Music.

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